

1 Corinthians

Bible Study

Paul, an Apostle...

1 Corinthians 9:1–27

Understanding our liberty in Christ is an important step in our Christian walk. There are actually very few believers who truly understand how much freedom we have. Many impose unbiblical restrictions upon believers such as hairstyles or clothing choices, or they make rules about church attendance, what we should eat or drink, or any number of restrictions to appear more holy.

Any believer who has studied Pauline doctrine should understand that we have been given much latitude in determining what we do. There are actually very few restrictions placed upon a believer in this Dispensation of Grace, especially if compared with those who were under the Mosaic Law. While there are certainly moral restrictions given to us, most restrictions put on the believer today come out of the mind of men and not from God. Paul says that all things were lawful for him (1 Corinthians 6:12), meaning that we have the freedom to do something unless the Bible specifically says it is wrong in this Dispensation of Grace. However, we are to evaluate our actions not by the liberty given to us by God, but by those around us. I have liberty, but I also need to temper my liberty according to the needs and beliefs of others. In other words, a believer's main goal should be for the edification of other believers, not for the exercise of his or her own freedom. We can easily become a stumbling block to weaker Christians who we inadvertently encourage to go against their conscience when they see a stronger believer enjoying their God-given liberty.

Defense and privilege of Paul's apostleship (verses 1–14)

Paul once again defends his apostleship by asking rhetorical questions. His apostleship was given to him by Jesus Christ and the proof of his apostleship is shown in his work with the Corinthians. Although they are far from being exemplary Christians, they were saved under Paul's ministry of preaching and teaching the Gospel of Grace. There had been a change in them spiritually, and bringing them from death to life was proof of the power of Paul's message. Paul's godly influence upon the Corinthians was evident in 2 Corinthians 3:2–3 where he states that their testimony was seen by all men and was a reflection of Paul's work among them.

Paul now defends his actions as an apostle by asking more rhetorical questions. Are they free to eat and drink? Are they able to have a family, as Peter has? Are they allowed to be supported by the work of the ministry? This last question is expanded upon in the next seven verses and is related to their right to take money for their work in the ministry.

If a person works, he has the right to be paid. If a farmer plants a vineyard, he has a right to enjoy the yield of his crop (2 Timothy 2:6). The one who tends sheep also should expect to reap the benefit of raising the sheep. The same goes for a minister of the gospel. The man who labors in preaching and teaching God's word should expect to be compensated for his work. This idea is not something Paul is coming up with so that they will support him monetarily, but is a principle found in the Mosaic Law. The Law states that the ox should be allowed to eat while it is working at threshing (Deuteronomy 25:4). This isn't written only for the animal, but is also true of a person who is doing a work of service for the Lord. The minister who sows spiritual things can fully expect to be supported in material things.

The Lord has directed that those proclaiming the gospel have the right to get their living from the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:14). Although it was fully within Paul's authority to exercise his right to be paid for his work, he chose not to do this because he didn't want to hinder the preaching of Jesus Christ and distract a weak and carnal group of believers to be turned away from spiritual growth. Paul had the liberty to ask them for monetary support, but didn't do that because he thought it would not be to their advantage to do so. He was also concerned that he would be criticized for making money from the gospel. Paul's single-

minded goal was the advancement of the gospel, and to accomplish that he put aside his own needs for the benefit of their needs. He did not exercise his liberty for the sake of the gospel.

Paul finishes up this section by stating that whether paid or not paid, he is under compulsion to preach the Gospel of Grace because he was made a steward of the mysteries of God (1 Corinthians 4:1; Galatians 2:7; Ephesians 3:2; Colossians 1:25). To be a faithful steward, he needed to preach the gospel.

The words steward and dispensation are closely related. In the Greek, steward is *oikonomos* (G3623) and dispensation is *oikonomia* (G3622). A steward dispenses his master's goods as one who has been put in charge of his household (Matthew 24:45). Paul has been made a steward of this special "household" of Grace. This special dispensation includes new concepts such as the Church, the Body of Christ, the sealing of the Holy Spirit, and the promise of a heavenly existence in eternity. Peter is also said to be the steward (dispenser) of the manifold grace of God (1 Peter 4:10). This is a reference to God's overarching grace shown toward mankind throughout history, not the Dispensation of Grace. It should be obvious (although it is muddled by many with Pauline theology) that Peter was speaking specifically to Israel about their prophetic program, which is unrelated to Paul's Mystery program. Peter was writing to the Little Flock of believers, not the Church, the Body of Christ. Notice how Peter tells his audience to hope to the end for the grace that is to come to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:13). He also states that God's judgement will begin at the house of God, a reference to the nation of Israel going through the seven-year Tribulation (1 Peter 4:17). The Body of Christ is never going to be under God's judgment (Romans 8:1). Also, according to Paul, we already have every spiritual blessing, and we are already seen as seated at the right hand of Jesus Christ in the heavenly places (Ephesians 1:3; 2:6). Peter's teachings fit perfectly with Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and his ministry to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Master of morphing (verses 18–23)

Paul never compromised or ran from his commission to spread the Gospel of Grace. This is obvious when you see how he suffered for the sake of the gospel (2 Corinthians 11:23–27). Paul wore the marks of suffering as a badge of faithfulness in contrast to preachers today who like to preach that riches and worldly possessions are a sign of God's blessings. By that measure, God hated Paul.

In order to reach the maximum number of people, Paul did whatever was necessary to bring them the gospel. He never changed his gospel message, but he did what was necessary so as not to turn people off. He became a servant to all people, and came to them where they were at. This was why he had Timothy circumcised. Traveling with an uncircumcised man would have kept him from effectively reaching the Jews. He became all things to all people so that he may be able to see some of them saved. This ties in with the liberty he had as a believer in this Dispensation of Grace. He could take a Jewish vow because of his liberty. He was allowed to observe the Jewish feasts because he had the liberty to do so. There was liberty to have Timothy circumcised and the liberty to not have Titus circumcised. Paul, however, was careful to use this liberty for the furtherance of the Gospel, not for his own personal benefit.

Running the race (verses 24–27)

Exercising his liberty for the benefit of others is characterized as running a race. Using liberty for the benefit of others takes much work and discipline, just as it does for a marathon runner to train for a race. Paul would subject himself to many hardships and persecutions in order to complete the task set before him, that of being a faithful steward of the gospel. We too need to present our bodies as a living sacrifice that is made useful to the Lord (Romans 12:1–2). When we fall, we are to get up and continue the race, reaching for the goal (Philippians 3:13–14).

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